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# **BIG CITY: CIVIC SYMBOLISM AND SCOTTISH NATIONALISM<sup>i</sup>**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The stock symbols of Scotland and Scottishness are all too familiar. Living in Scotland one becomes almost numb to the drone of bagpipes and kilts, heather and kailyards, Nessie and Braveheart--the low hum of 'cultural sub-nationalism' that has so perturbed Tom Nairn (1977) and others over the years. As an American with an academic interest in Scotland and nationalism<sup>ii</sup> I have often found myself straining to draw peoples' attention away from these symbols and towards others I have found more telling for understanding contemporary nationalist demands in Scotland, such as *Covenants and Claims of Right* (Hearn 1998; 2000). It is striking that if one surveys the academic books, political magazines, and campaigning group literature concerned with the home rule cause in Scotland over the last two decades, one of the most persistent images one encounters in photos and graphic art is of a Greek Parthenon-like structure, familiar to Edinburghers as the facade of the Old Royal High School aside Calton Hill. Hardly your garden variety kitsch. Few outside of Scotland, perhaps even outside the central belt of Scotland, would anticipate this. This observation provides the germ of the ideas explored here. There are particular historical reasons for this image's prominence, which I will discuss below, but I will be arguing that its selection as a key symbol of recent Scottish Nationalism is also due to ideological processes more generally bound up with the meanings of urbanism and nationalism in the modern era.

I aim to explore the relationships between political symbolism, civic nationalism, and urbanism in the Scottish context, putting forward three interrelated arguments. Firstly, despite the often rural and pre-modern imagery of nationalist discourses, the idea of the ‘city’ is central to nationalism, especially in its more ‘civic’ and ‘liberal’ varieties. Secondly, the historical and political development of urban Scotland, both its cities and towns, provide an important key for understanding nationalism and national identity in Scotland. And finally, the need to represent Scottish nationalism as a civic nationalism has led in practice to a privileging of the symbolism of the Edinburgh cityscape in recent Scottish nationalist discourse. Thus I try to examine why Edinburgh has been unusually suited, both by its appearance and history, to providing the key symbols of Scotland’s civic nationalism.

## **THE CITY AS SYMBOL OF THE NATION**

Nationalisms notoriously derive their key symbols not from urban contexts but from the countryside and a distant, pre-modern past (cf. Frykman and Löfgren 1987; Swedenburg 1990). This is part of why peasant ways of life, folk customs and beliefs, were a central concern among early ethnologists in Europe during the heyday of nation-state formation. The pious peasant in the natural landscape frequently stood for the integrity and wholesomeness of the nation. In Europe heroes from medieval episodes have provided stock figures for embedding projects of national liberation and consolidation in a mythic past. Scotland has no shortage of these kinds of symbols. Nationalist lore is full of quaint imagery of rustic highlanders amid the heathered glens, and the likes of William Wallace (a.k.a. ‘Braveheart’, a.k.a. Mel Gibson) fighting off the predatory English, broadsword in hand. But these rural and ancient symbols are precisely of the blatant, ‘out front’ variety that I want to suggest are not adequate for a fuller understanding of nationalist symbolism. Refocusing our gaze on the cityscape may help us make a useful analytic shift.

We should remember that nationalist thought has a winding genealogy. The ideas we encounter today are an amalgam of different ideological elements laid down over the last

three hundred years. The first wave, epitomised by the French Revolution and the fusion of ideals of ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’ with the notion of popular sovereignty, had been prepared by the humanists’ recovery of classical texts of Greece and Rome, and the diffusion of civic republican ideas throughout European intellectual circles. Although in divergent ways, figures such as Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hume, Adam Ferguson, and Adam Smith, all referred back to accounts of small, democratically self-governing polities as models for critiquing the absolutist monarchical state and formulating visions of a new kind of political order either suited to, or as a bulwark against, the deep economic transformation Europe was undergoing (Viroli 1997; Haakonssen 1995; Yack 1992: 35-88). Thus it was the ancient city-state that supplied the first metaphor for imagining the still forming nation-state (Anderson 1996: 20), and many intellectuals of the day envisioned an ideal world of small self-governing states, seeing the polis as the proper size for effective (though often highly restricted) democracy (Ibid.: 111-113). As Tom Nairn observes:

Geneva was also the inspiration of the most radical of these thinkers, Rousseau. In 1746 the Republic of Genoa had regained its independence and the astonishing deeds of its People’s Assembly were the talk of polite Europe. Thus, not long before the great revolutions which led to nation-building, it was by no means obvious that city-states were finished and small or micro-states obsolete (Nairn 1997: 127).

As is well known, a second wave of nationalist thought developed in the later nineteenth century, as political and economic transformation moved eastward through Europe. This strain rejected enlightenment universalism, and was informed instead by romantic essentialisations of language, culture, and later “race” (Hobsbawm 1992). The legacy of these two waves for contemporary theorisations of nationalism has been an enduring tendency toward dichotomous typologies opposing various forms: eastern and western (Kohn 1967), primordial and civic (Geertz 1963), ethnic and civic (Greenfeld 1992), cultural and political (Chatterjee 1993; Hutchinson 1987), illiberal and liberal (Brown 1999).<sup>iii</sup> For those interested in cultural processes, the ethnic (cultural, primordial, etc.) dimension of

nationalism can hold a special fascination, and is often privileged as defining the true or deeper reality of nationalism. I question this view, and argue instead that this highly variable phenomenon is best investigated by keeping in mind these ideological tensions that have been historically built into the process. It is probably more useful to observe how these different dimensions are manifested within and between various cases of nationalism, and then seek explanations for this variability.

Scotland provides an instance of what has been called neo-nationalism (Nairn 1975; McCrone 1998: 125-148), that is, nationalist movements happening within the liberal democracies of the industrialised West, Catalonia and Quebec being the two other most frequently cited examples (Keating 1997; Guibernau 1999). In general, these movements are seen as characterised by their primarily parliamentary paths to greater self-government and their extensive roots in civil society. Moreover, they are associated with relatively prosperous regions, and cities within those regions (Edinburgh, Barcelona, Montreal), and with strategic concerns about modes of integration into developing supra-national bodies such as the European Union and NAFTA. While hardly devoid of ethnic dimensions and conflicts, particularly around language issues in Catalonia and Quebec, they are often taken as exemplars of the more civic and liberal forms that nationalism can take under certain circumstances.

Of course people in Scotland, especially activists in the home rule cause, are well aware of the conceptual tensions outlined above, and of the bad reputation that attaches to 'ethnic nationalism'. Not surprisingly, they make considerable effort to assert and highlight the civic and liberal character of nationalism in Scotland. My argument is that this leads to a selective bias towards the vocabulary and imagery of classic, civic nationalism, with its emphasis on the city and the city-state. In an era in which democracy and the legitimacy of the modern state are commonly seen as having been weakened by processes of globalisation, arguments for new forms of government calibrated to a smaller scale have a renewed potency

(Seligman 1995; Offe and Preuss 1991; cf. Petersen 1990), and the urban world plays an integral role in how this is imagined.

## **URBAN SCOTLAND: PROCESS AND IMAGE**

Scotland was exceptional in its rapid population growth and urbanisation in the nineteenth century. From 1800 to 1900 the population grew from about 1.5 million to about 4.5 million, levelling off in the twentieth century, peaking just over 5 million mid-century. In 1801 the four cities--Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen--contained 11 per cent of the population, a proportion that had grown to 35 per cent by 1901 (Gordon and Dicks 1983: 8). Around these core cities there was parallel growth in two types of towns, in the industrial satellite towns chiefly in the west (e.g. Paisley, Kilmarnock, Motherwell, Airdrie, Coatbridge), and to a lesser degree in the towns that provided services and markets for the agrarian regions (e.g. Perth, Inverness, Dumfries) (Checkland and Checkland 1989: 50-51). By 1951 the proportion of the population in the four cities had reached 40 per cent, from which it has since declined to around 30 per cent (McCrone n.d.). Nonetheless, David McCrone has noted that

While there has been a decline in the percentage of people living in the larger towns and cities (those over 50,000 in size), Scotland has become a more urbanised society in general. Nearly 8 out of 10 live in settlements of more than 5000, compared with just over 6 out of 10 in 1931. And if we focus on 'urban' areas of more than 1000 people, fully 9 out of 10 Scots live in 'towns' compared with 8 out of 10 in 1931 and less than 50% in 1851 (Ibid.).

The governance and management of urban life in Scotland over the last two centuries can be seen as unfolding in two phases. During the heyday of industrialisation and liberalism in the later nineteenth century, the cities and towns were governed by a mixture of petty bourgeois urban landlords and professionals, with a greater role for the old landed elite in the more

rural towns. Local government was largely in the hands of urban landlords with small businesses--in 1875 eight out of every ten councillors in Edinburgh were landlords (Ibid.)--while the various supervisory boards that handled such matters as poor laws, public health, prisons and schools, were populated by middle class professionals with a sprinkling of civic minded aristocrats. With the increasing role of central government planning via the Scottish Office (est. 1887), and the Rent Restrictions Act of 1915 undermining the power base of urban landlords, the second phase arose. By 1929 the myriad of small local authorities had been combined into large unitary authorities designed to achieve new economies of scale, providing an increasing array of social services. Most central among these was housing: 'While the private landlord was responsible for about ninety per cent of all dwellings in 1900, by 1990 this had shrunk to six percent' (Devine 1996: 11). Urban governance of the twentieth century welfare state now fell largely into the hands semi-professional local politicians operating within a modern party framework, functioning especially as public landlords (but still with important traces of middle class professional voluntary participation through various voluntary non-departmental public bodies).

A proper perspective on the recent past is always more difficult, but one might want to argue that Scotland headed into a new phase in the 1970s, with the 'right to buy' chipping away the better quality public housing stock, local government powers and budgets substantially reduced, a new trend toward rural (non-agrarian) repopulation in the northern highlands and Skye, and the more equalised distribution of the urban population alluded to above, caused partly by the decanting of the urban poor from the major cities after World War Two, but no doubt also partly due to older towns now functioning both as centres for often ailing local industries and services, and as 'bedroom communities' for city commuters. The recent withdrawals of some local authorities from COSLA, and the Scottish Executive's call for a 'review of cities' possibly leading to proposals for new unified 'city regions' (Scott 2001) further suggest fundamental realignments of urban power are underway.

In his discussion of the Scottish Victorian city, Geoffrey Best argues that it was characterised by a kind of ‘civic authoritarianism’ involving the intensive use of Police Acts to monitor the working poor of the cities. He suggests that ‘the Scottish cities proper were accustomed to a civic government much firmer and more positive, in some respects, than were English cities’ (1968: 335). Best attributes this partly to the intensity of urban growth and poverty and the peculiar crowding caused by Scottish property laws that encouraged building vertically and subdividing (‘making down’) properties into ever more dwellings. But he also seems to suggest that there is something more going on here, something cultural, perhaps the imprint of Calvinist stricture on local civic pride. It would seem likely that part of that ‘something more’ lay simply in the absence of national Scottish government. If Scottish elites and middle classes were to provide national leadership, how else but through the organs of city and town government? In time this civic authoritarianism was transformed along welfarist lines, reaching its apogee in the mid-twentieth century ‘Kingdom’ of Strathclyde. But here again the elaboration of local government power must have been related to the absence of democratic government at the national level.

Let me take this sketch of Scottish urban processes and play it off against representations of urban Scotland. It has often been noted that an important part of the iconography of Scotland, its self-image, has been drawn neither from rural peasant life, nor from the big cities, but from the small-to-mid-sized towns (Harvie and Walker 1990; McCrone n.d.; McPherson 1983). The most notorious manifestation of this tendency has usually been located in the kailyard literature popular around the 1890s, which celebrated small town life and values, wrapping these in a mawkish sentimentality, and catering to a combination of Scottish middle classes and expatriates abroad (Devine 1999: 296-297). But there are some grains of truth beneath the cringing stereotype. Two key institutions of Scottish middle-class governance in the nineteenth century, which often figured prominently in these stories, were the Kirk and the parish school. It was in the towns that these pillars of civic authority were often the most effective, their efforts at social betterment and social control being more frustrated in the burgeoning cities. Thus for the Scottish middle classes the towns probably



offered the paradigm of urban governance working as it should. Just as the typical protagonist of the kailyard tale travelled from the town to the city, only to experience its evils and return to hearth and home, so movement between the rural, small town and city settings, stimulated by phenomenal urban growth, was common. In their search for signs of Scottish popular culture between 1850 and 1914, Christopher Harvie and Graham Walker have suggested that

It is likely that mobility increased the level of cultural interaction between the city and the small town, between rural and urban Scotland within the cities themselves. ... [E]ven Glasgow and Edinburgh received a substantial cultural input from beyond their boundaries. The *People's Journal*, the most popular Victorian Scottish newspaper, was as popular in the industrial Lowlands as the more farming-oriented North-East and the West Highlands. Its 'Glasgow and West Scotland' edition sold 205,000 copies a week in 1890, the highest sale of any paper in the region. The paper's staples were serialised fiction in themes which were irregularly, if pertinently, about city life; history which focused on pre-industrial Scotland; folklore which tended to reinforce regional loyalties, particularly to the North-East and the Borders; the use in the published prose and poetry of the vernacular, particularly the rural dialects of the North-East and Ayrshire; and a form of liberal politics which grew out of Scotland's rural egalitarian tradition rather more than the challenges of the city (1990: 342-343; see also Donaldson 1986).

The authors go on to suggest that the Scottish popular press of the period

spoke to those many people whose lives in the city were often shadowed by the recent memory of a small-town or rural existence, and to those whose mobility to and from the city perhaps induced an ambiguous sense of identity or a complex set of loyalties regarding Place (1990: 343).

This general flow and counter-flow of people may also have been put into particularly sharp focus for some individuals experiencing specific professional pilgrimages between towns and cities. Dealing more with the first half of the twentieth century, Andrew McPherson has posited the ‘Kirriemuir career’, an ideal-typical life-path commonly experienced by teachers both in their own education and subsequent professional lives, that wended its way primarily through small town Scotland. He contends that

the Kirriemuir career took one through schools and communities in which social intercourse and educational attainment were less deeply differentiated by social class relationships than they were in the cities. The education authority schools of the city had no place on this career path ... and no place, either, on the symbolic map. For the ambitious lad o’ pairts the career frontier lay, not in the West, but in the East, North or South; not in the city and the future but in the parish and the past (1983: 229; see also Anderson 1985).

McPherson’s specific aim here is to better understand the endurance and dissemination of the egalitarian, meritocratic myths of the ‘lad o’ pairts’ in Scotland, but more generally he sheds light again on why the small town figures so prominently in Scotland’s self-image. One suspects the study of similar careers by other middle-class professionals might tend to enhance this account.

What all this suggests is that amid the intense urbanisation of roughly 1850-1950 the Scottish town provided the symbolic paradigm of social and moral stability through which the dominant middle classes and ‘self-bettering’ working classes often imagined their world. A world where modern industry and professionalism were present, but not overwhelming, allowing the space for effective, liberal self-government. Some Scottish intellectuals such as Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) consciously addressed these changes, attempting to conceptualise a synthesis of rural and urban life that was more balanced (Harvie and Walker 1990; Watson 1996: 287). But what I am trying to outline is a less consciously formulated

vision of Scottish society that arose particularly out the senses of fear, pride and social responsibility that preoccupied the Scottish middle classes of that period.

Although the town became an important ideological reference point, the major cities were in fact governed by a confident middle class, and came to display the architectural marks of their vision. Describing what he calls 'unionist nationalism', Graeme Morton (1999) has shown how during the nineteenth century middle-class pride in Scotland and Scottishness was often expressed in Edinburgh, for example, through public subscription and monument building, such as the Memorial to Sir Walter Scott on Princes Street, with its elaborate gothic spire enclosing the statue of Scott, or the Monument to the Dead of the Napoleonic War, the unfinished replica of the Parthenon, which overlooks the centre of the city from the top of Calton Hill. Edinburgh today abounds with such architectural features, attesting to the civic and national sentiments of the period. This pride, however, was seen as a logical and necessary ingredient of the composite nature of the United Kingdom. It was because Scotland was a modern and progressive society that it could dispense with the encumbrance of having its own parliament, and enter into this larger project of British Empire, seen as the modern carrier of civilisation. Architecturally, the classical revival was the prime expression of this ethos. While the gothic revival of the nineteenth century, so popular south of the border, had some presence in Scotland, particularly in regard to structures with spiritual and romantic associations, such as churches, the country houses of the gentry, and the Scott Monument, it was the more severe Greek style that continued to inform civic structures associated with government, education, the arts, and sciences. It was a style that expressed the rationalism and austere liberalism of the governing classes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scotland, especially in Edinburgh.

Interestingly, just as the bucolic image of small town Scotland persisted as an important part of its self-identity throughout the throws of industrialisation, it is only with the onset of deindustrialisation that the image of Scotland as rooted the urban cityscape becomes fully normalised, the story that Scotland tells itself about itself. Roderick Watson (1996) has

traced the evolution of themes in Scottish literature across the twentieth century, highlighting a shift from the rural, Celtic and ‘metaphysical,’ to the urban, working class and ‘realist’. Around World War Two, partly through the stimulus of the Glasgow Unity Theatre, the latter set of themes begin to develop, but they do not really come into their own until the 1970s (I think a similar case could be made for representations in television and film). William McIlvanney’s iconic novel of urban working class life, *Docherty*, was published in 1975, but set around 1906, and his novel of the collapse of that way of life and its communal ethos some eighty years later, *The Big Man*, was published in 1985 (Ibid.: 301). Thus, just as the small town provided an image of community throughout the era of the industrial city, the urban tenement becomes the symbolic locus of solidarity, as cities are reshaped to provide more services, and make less things. Once again, Minerva’s owl takes flight at dusk.

## **SYMBOLISM OF THE EDINBURGH CITYSCAPE**

Because my research has been on the nationalist movement in Scotland my main focus in the following section is on the symbolisation of the *nationalist cause* in and through urban contexts, and not simply on the symbolisation of the *nation*. These two, the nation as an ‘imagined community’ in Benedict Anderson’s phrase (1991), and ‘nationalism’ as a political project, are related but distinct (Calhoun 1997: 6). In the former the greater emphasis is on symbolising solidarity, while in the latter, it is on symbolising protest and objectives. Moreover, my interest is primarily in the process of political and moral rhetoric, with how symbols get used in a process of pursuing change (Austin 1962; Burke 1950; Fernandez 1986). I am less concerned with a more Durkheimian tradition in which symbols are studied primarily for their ability to represent, and make conceivable, social wholes (Durkheim and Mauss 1967; Geertz 1973; Lincoln 1989).

*Glasgow versus Edinburgh:* Cities and symbols are both complex, contradictory, and evolving processes. The way that a particular city concretises meanings associated with the

nation will depend on what historical context, and what social groups, in terms of class, political interests, geography, etc., are being examined. This makes the entire project of taking a city as a symbol of the nation problematic--from whose perspective? As Victor Turner pointed out long ago, symbols are multivocalic, meaning different things to different actors involved in the same symbolic process (1967:27-30).

In Scotland there is the long-standing rivalry between Edinburgh and Glasgow for this position of symbol of the nation. I would contend that the other major cities and towns, while epitomising dimensions of the Scottish experience, are too closely associated with their particular geographic regions to contend for the role of exemplars of the nation as a whole. Both Glasgow and Edinburgh provide potent, yet strongly contrasting symbolic clusters in relation to the Scottish nation. On several occasions during my field work in the early 1990s I met the comment that Glasgow was the more truly Scottish city, and perhaps I should have based myself there. While sceptical about such essentialisations, I did learn to appreciate the familiar contrasts between the two cities that underlie this argument. Although each represents different aspects of the nation, I will argue that Edinburgh has, in recent years, provided a more apt set of symbols of *nationalism* (as opposed to *the nation* in general). But first, the contrasts, bearing in mind that I am emphasising well-worn cultural stereotypes that, while frequently voiced in Scotland, are often contradicted in fact. It is precisely the stereotypes that we are concerned with here.

Glasgow is commonly viewed as a more 'Celtic' city. Much of its rapid population growth during the industrialisation of the nineteenth century came from rural depopulation of Gaelic speaking areas of both the Scottish Highlands and Ireland. One anecdotal sign of this story of immigration and internal migration is that to this day there is a stereotype of the Glasgow policeman as a big bruiser from the Highlands, a stereotype that roughly corresponds to the New York stereotype of the Irish cop. Edinburgh on the other hand, did not experience such a pronounced Gaelic influx, and as a political centre, has long been more culturally dominated by Scotland's peerage, which has tended to assimilate to English norms for

centuries. After the union of the English and Scottish Parliaments in 1707, English influence in speech and manners, seen as signs of civilising, became increasingly dominant among the Edinburgh middle class, and this is apparent to this day. Thus Edinburgh is often seen as more anglicised in comparison to Glasgow's hybrid Celtic culture.

These differences in cultural influence, of highlands and Ireland versus England, correspond to basic differences in class composition and representation. Glasgow is seen as a 'working class' city, a vision that preserves the classic image of the industrial proletariat, despite the profound changes of deindustrialisation and urban renewal over the last few decades. This image is constantly recreated in novels, films, television shows, and art. Glasgow is a very male place, the home of the 'Hard Man', drinking heavily and always ready for a fight. It is a city of men marching like soldiers to the shipyards every morning, lunch pails in hand, to spend their days banging on metal with large hammers. It was the site of the Red Clydeside. More broadly it was the centre of Scottish industry and commerce, as well as science and technological invention in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Edinburgh by contrast is a place of art, politics, and learning. The University of Edinburgh, the Royal College of Surgeons, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, are emblematic of what goes on there. Rather than shipbuilding, publishing and book production were among its major industries. Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* provides an acute diagnosis of the world of Edinburgh middle-class pretension. Even today, the annual Edinburgh International Festival carries on a tradition of associating Edinburgh with high culture, the arts, and a cosmopolitan world view.

The contrast between the two cities can be summed up with the two phrases that have been used to label them. Glasgow, in the years around the turn of the century and the apex of the British Empire, became known as the 'Workshop of the World', building ships that would cross the globe, expanding the free market. Edinburgh, with the flowering of the Enlightenment in the middle of the eighteenth century, became known as the 'Athens of the

North’--that great centre of humanistic and philosophical activity during the European transition from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ society.

These distinctions, schematic as they are, raise certain questions. In that nationalist politics in Scotland has a strong socialist strain, and has been very concerned with re-establishing Scotland’s economic viability in a changing global economy, one might think that Glasgow’s working class and industrial glory would offer the most dominant set of symbols for nationalism today. As already indicated, it does provide powerful images and stories, but these do not necessarily serve to characterise the movement as a whole. During an early trip to Scotland in preparation for field work, an officer of the SNP shared with me a campaign leaflet used by Alex Neil in a recent Glasgow Central local election, which paired him with Jim Sillars, characterising them as the ‘New Clydesiders’ thus attempting to capitalise on the romantic working class imagery of the Red Clydeside. This failed to capture the imaginations of the voters of Glasgow Central. To some degree this is because the Labour Party, despite its modernising, has a prior and more plausible claim to such symbolism; it is also because Scotland is rapidly changing, from a heavy industrial to high tech and service sector economy with a feminising work force, for whom such rhetoric may not have the same pull. On the other hand, one might also expect that Edinburgh, with its reputation for anglicisation, might be an especially poor symbolic resource for a social movement that seeks increased autonomy from England. And yet, as we will see, Edinburgh has proven to be fertile ground for nationalist symbolism.

I want to suggest that there are other processes at work, that also help account for why Edinburgh images often dominate nationalist discourse. While Scottish nationalism is politically left-of-centre, inclined toward a somewhat more socialist and redistributive conception of the modern state (Bennie et al. 1997:138-139), it is also social democratic, with a strong emphasis on the democratic. This is not to concede the notion that Scottish culture is by nature more democratic and egalitarian than that of the English (cf. Davie 1981; McCrone, et al. 1982; Hearn 2000: 139-154). Rather, it is to draw attention to the fact that

the central goal of the movement has been to effect an institutional change in the structures of democratic government, first and foremost by establishing a new parliament. Scottish autonomist discourse is saturated with terms such as ‘civic, civil society, democratic, constitutional,’ etc.. While issues of class antagonism are involved in this political process, they are primarily latent--as they tend to be within the dynamics of all modern technocratic and bureaucratic states (Habermas 1973). The dominant language of Scottish nationalism is one of constitutional reform, and *this tends to select and emphasise symbols that bring out this theme*. In a time when socialism and explicitly class-based politics are in disarray, even though these are close to the hearts of many activists in the Scottish home rule movement, the lore associated with them provides less effective symbols. Instead, correcting Scotland’s ‘democratic deficit’ by strengthening its voice as a polity has been seen as in line with recent events in Eastern Europe surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union (e.g., the Solidarity movement in Poland, the ‘peaceful divorce’ of the Czech and Slovak republics, the independence of the Baltic states). In this context, it is the ‘Athens of the North’ rather than the ‘Workshop of the World’ that provides the most compelling symbols.

*New Meanings for Old Places:* This brings me to the recent enacting of nationalism in Edinburgh. In discussing the ‘unionist nationalism’ of nineteenth-century I have tried to convey how Edinburgh is already laden with cultural and historical imagery carrying various nationalist meanings. It is a storehouse of images. I now elaborate the argument that modern Scottish nationalism tends to create, select and emphasise symbols with democratic and constitutional connotations. I will focus on three places and associated events in Edinburgh, familiar to those who have followed the story of Scottish home rule in recent years, that have become freighted with particular meanings: (1) The Old Royal High School, (2) The Sermon on the Mound, and (3) The Vigil on Calton Hill.

*(1) The Old Royal High School:* One of the late products of the flowering of Edinburgh after the union was the Royal High School, the imposing Grecian structure that overlooks the city from the side of Calton Hill. For many years it was the premier high school for the children



of Edinburgh's elite and well-to-do. In the second half of the twentieth century, since the spread of a more egalitarian approach to public education, it served a variety of other functions as a government office building (lately it has housed the Procurator Fiscal Service), but it is still commonly referred to as the 'Old' Royal High School. But with hopes soaring in the period leading up to the 1979 devolution referendum, the inner debating chamber of the School was outfitted to serve an anticipated Assembly, and the building was popularly seen as the 'home of the future parliament' thereafter.<sup>iv</sup> From that point on the building became a key symbol of the demand for home rule, throughout the long winter of Conservative government and obstruction of the pro-parliamentary cause.

Various events reinforced the symbolism of the High School building and its democratic and constitutional associations. In October 1981 Jim Sillars, then leader of the more radical/left wing of the SNP, broke into the building with some companions to 'hold a debate' on unemployment in Scotland. Eventually guards showed up and Sillars, after reading a statement, was arrested and fined for vandalism. But the act garnered much attention in the press. During my field work the Campaign for a Scottish Parliament, organised a 'Consultative Conference' on the establishment of a Scottish Senate, that took place at the Old Royal High School. Sponsored in part by *Scotland on Sunday*, the conference brought together representatives from various parts of Scottish civil society--churches, unions, ethnic-based associations, businesses, and numerous agencies in the voluntary sector oriented toward addressing social problems (e.g., unemployment, homelessness, care for the elderly, etc.). The idea was that by establishing a kind of 'shadow' assembly in the form of a Senate to debate and articulate Scottish public opinion on major issues, dissent from the status quo, and the demand for a parliament, would be made more palpable.

At the time of the Consultative Conference there had recently been plans floated by the Tory administration of the Scottish Office to sell off the Royal High School to private interests. At an introductory welcoming speech at the Conference given by a member of the Edinburgh City Council, strong resolve to oppose this move was expressed, seeing it as an attempt to

undermine the significance of the building to the pro-parliament cause. The struggle over the fate of the building thus became an expression of the more general structural opposition between the forces of the Labour dominated local government and the Tory controlled administration of the Scottish Office, respectively aligned for and against constitutional change.

Finally, as noted at the outset, the Parthenon-like image of the central portion of the Old Royal High School has become an extremely common image in nationalist literature, both popular and academic. It stands out on the covers of numerous recent publications about Scottish nationalism and politics, and the logo of the Campaign for a Scottish Parliament was the Parthenon facade superimposed upon a silhouette of the map of Scotland.

(2) *The Sermon on the Mound:* Another site of some political significance for Edinburgh is 'The Mound.' The low-lying area that separates Edinburgh's Old Town and New Town was once a marshy loch, which since the eighteenth century has been drained and filled in with railroad lines, Waverley Station, and Princes Street Gardens. During the construction of the New Town, excess dirt and rubbish were piled across this drained lake to form The Mound, a wide land bridge facilitating movement between the two parts of the city. Today the Mound supports the Parthenon-like structures of the National Gallery and the Royal Scottish Academy, built in the mid-nineteenth century and designed by Edinburgh's premier architect in the classical style, William Henry Playfair. It provides a wide paved space for pedestrian traffic and public assembly, and is a common meeting place for holding rallies and commencing political marches.

But 'The Mound' also, by association, alludes to the Church of Scotland Assembly Building that sits at the top of the rise of the Old Town, overlooking The Mound proper (and also to the headquarters of the Bank of Scotland nearby). Also designed by Playfair, it displays a restrained, semi-gothic style often preferred for ecclesiastical architecture. Much of the history of political conflict between Scotland and England has centred around the Kirk.

Since the seventeenth century, conflicts and negotiations between Scotland and England over the terms of Scotland's incorporation into the British political system have often involved struggles over the autonomy of the Kirk and its affairs in Scotland. When the Scottish and English Parliaments were merged in 1707, the Kirk continued as a dominant institution for the formation of Scottish elite and public opinion. The stresses of industrialisation brought on schisms within the Kirk in the 1700s and 1800s, and the Great Disruption of 1843 so divided it that it was permanently weakened in its role as a hegemonic social institution. Nonetheless, The Church of Scotland is still the National Church, and a steady and respected voice in public affairs, despite the general secularisation of Scottish culture in line with similar trends throughout Europe. Moreover, the Kirk has tended to conform to the corporatist and social democratic tendencies of British politics in this century, broadly aligning its spiritual mission with the social mission of the welfare state.

To this historical sketch we must add one of structure. The Scottish Presbyterian Church contrasts with the Church of England in its political and decision making structure. Instead of a hierarchy of Bishops appointed at various levels by those above, it relies on a process of nomination of representatives from below, to the Parish Kirk Session, to the Presbyteries, to the Synods, and finally up to the level of the General Assembly. In practice this tended to produce an oligarchic structure in which male members of local elites dominated at various levels. Even so, the logic of the basic structure of governance and decision making is more democratic, as many in Scotland would hasten to point out.

Enter Margaret Thatcher. In May of 1988, attempting to consolidate her troubled leadership of the Tory Party, and improve her always poor public image in Scotland, she went North to give some speeches. Her address to the General Assembly in Edinburgh has gone down in infamy as the 'Sermon on the Mound.' -- an event frequently referenced in Scottish nationalist discourse. In short, Ms. Thatcher sought to lecture Scotland on the congruence of Christian faith and free market capitalism. To this end she cited Paul in Thessalonians: 'If a man shall not work, he shall not eat...' (Mitchell 1990: 119), emphasising the call to

industriousness and individual responsibility for one's economic well-being. This 'sermon' fit into an already existing backdrop of commentary by Thatcher and her government ministers, on their puzzlement at how the country that created Adam Smith could have wandered so far from his vision, and on the debilitating effects of the 'nanny state' in Scotland, creating what she called a 'dependency culture' instead of an 'enterprise culture.' The ministers and elders of the Kirk were not impressed. As James Mitchell describes:

Having listened to the Prime Minister, though only after five Kirk Ministers objected to her presence, the Moderator presented her with copies of two reports, "Housing Scotland's People" and "Just Sharing." Both were highly critical of government policies and involved a radically different interpretation of the social and economic meaning of Biblical texts (1990: 120).

Another observer notes that partly in response to this event,

In 1989 the Kirk's Church and Nation Committee produced a report that attacked the 'elective dictatorship' of the Westminster parliamentary system and issued a call to arms: "From a Scottish constitutional and theological perspective this English constitutional tradition of state absolutism has always been unacceptable in theory. It is now intolerable in practice." (Marr 1992: 33).

These responses indicate how the Kirk served to articulate Scottish public opinion on, and rejection of, Thatcherism. The 'Sermon on the Mound' has become a dramatic event situated in a symbolically laden place, associated with long-term institutional conflicts between Scotland and England, that effectively summarises a major strain of Scottish sentiment regarding social democracy, political autonomy, and the dissent from neo-conservatism.

(3) *The Vigil on Calton Hill*: Finally, we have the Vigil on Calton Hill. In 1992, leading up to the General Election of that year, there were high hopes among devolution-minded Scots for a major upset of the Tory Party in Scotland, and advances for the SNP and Labour Party

that would at least force the constitutional question to the forefront of UK politics. In the event, the time was not ripe for a large electoral shift, and the Tories even managed to gain one parliamentary seat (up to 11 out of 72). Many Scots I have spoken to described the experience as one of being ‘gutted’. One response was for a small group of people assembled outside the gates of the Old Royal High School, across the street from the Scottish Office, to hold a candle-light vigil in protest on the first evening after the General Election. In the early days this site attracted a wide cross section of movement activists, and the loose formation constituted itself as “Democracy for Scotland” with the intention of maintaining a round-the-clock vigil on that site until a parliament was established, and to generally advertise and promote the cause. They remained there until the results of the Fall 1997 referendum--upon which they closed up shop. Not surprisingly the group underwent some routinisation and paring down in the early days as life went on and many activists reinvested their energies in more formal organisations such as the Campaign for a Scottish Parliament. Nonetheless there remained a dedicated inner circle, generally from more working class and less highly educated backgrounds, that kept the Vigil going, and that, while sometimes seen as eccentric, were generally viewed with sympathy in the movement.

The site itself was made up of a construction site port-a-cabin, an information table, a brazier made from a rusted 55 gallon drum surrounded with old chairs and benches, and some bins to hold firewood. Members met weekly around the brazier, sometimes referred to as the “flame of democracy,” to discuss plans. The Vigil was technically squatting on city property, but the tolerance of this, and even the assignment of a regular postal address, is indicative of the City Council’s support for the cause, as mentioned above. The spatial symbolism is particularly striking here. The Vigil was basically wedged between the Scottish Office, symbol of the ‘occupying power’ of Tory government until the 1997 Labour victory, and the Old Royal High School, symbol of the ‘future parliament.’ Furthermore, its location at the base of Calton Hill connected it with the prominent collection of national monuments that overlook the city from above.

In 1993 Democracy for Scotland, along with other organisations in the movement, especially the SNP, organised a large pro-parliament rally on top of the hill amid the monuments there. One part of this event involved the christening of a more elaborate brazier, built at one end of the crest of the hill. The brazier (the ‘flame’) sat atop a cairn-like pedestal made from stones brought to the site months earlier by people marching from various corners of Scotland. The significance of this cairn must be seen in both its intrinsic features and its context. The former are fairly obvious, but also significant are connotations such as the flame of the Olympics (and thus ancient democratic Athens once again), and the locating of this object on the Hill where various monuments of nineteenth-century unionist nationalism already existed, thereby subtly shifting, through association, their meanings as well.

*New Places for Old Meanings:* With the reality of the Scottish Parliament, the siting of the actual legislative body became a much more concrete problem. Rather than a matter of what symbols conveyed the aspirations of a broad coalition seeking democratic reform and various degrees of self-government, there arose a new question--what kind of parliament building would best represent the authority of this new political body and its vision of its political project. There were debates about whether it should be located in Glasgow or Edinburgh, or perhaps midway in Stirling, but a strong bias toward Edinburgh within the political establishment held sway. Many assumed that the Old Royal High School would be the natural place, but objections were raised. There were real logistical problems with the site regarding space and access, but also symbolic concerns. Was the stodgy classical architecture the proper image for a modern parliament facing the twenty-first century? What might the locating of a parliament in an old high school say about its authority? The decision-making process fell primarily into the hands of the late Donald Dewar, who labelled the Old Royal High School a ‘nationalist shibboleth’, and indeed the Labour Party had been more aloof from the symbolic activities around the Vigil and the High School than the SNP and many non-aligned activists, preferring to concentrate on the electoral road to power. More generally, the Labour Party which has ended up as the key agent in the delivery of devolution throughout the UK has consistently legitimised that project as one of

modernisation of government and consolidation of the union. From the standpoint of Labour's leadership, what is happening in Scotland is not the reassertion of a long-suppressed autonomy, but rather a dynamic innovation complimentary to various other constitutional reform projects, such as the Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland, reducing the role of hereditary peerage in the House of Lords, and the establishment of a Mayor and Council for London.

From this perspective, the current Labour government sought to promote a Scottish parliament building appropriate to its vision. The new site in Edinburgh close to Holyrood Palace was chosen, a competition was held for designs for a new building, and the contract awarded to a celebrated Catalan architect, the late Enric Miralles, who submitted a modern design featuring fluid curvilinear forms echoing the nearby hills in Holyrood Park. The choice of Miralles is itself highly symbolic, for it associates the Edinburgh parliament with the architectural prestige of Barcelona, and with the parallel political project of greater autonomy in Catalonia. The general assessment of observers has been that the re-establishment of the *Generalitat* in Catalonia has strengthened its role in Spain and reduced demands for full independence (Guibernau 1999: 43-44). Nationalism there appears to have been domesticated. This is very much the kind of future that the Scottish Labour Party would like to bring about for Scotland, and the SNP.

In the meantime, the new legislature has required a temporary home to conduct its business, and the Church of Scotland has obliged by leasing the General Assembly on The Mound, which has been combined with some nearby but inadequate government office space. So somewhat ironically, while the Greek classicism of the Royal High School has been rejected, and the modernism of Miralles' design has not yet arrived, the parliament finds itself housed in a Gothic church structure, vaguely reminiscent of Westminster. But as the confrontation between Margaret Thatcher and the General Assembly attests, claiming this space for Scottish government, even temporarily, has a certain symbolic savour.

To reiterate an earlier point, we need to look at symbols in process, as part of the construction of larger political and moral arguments. It seems to me that the examination of urban symbolism brings with it the risk of becoming fixated on the stability and concreteness of the features of the urban landscape. Here I have tried to focus on how various places, already significantly situated in both physical and conceptual ‘landscapes’, have acquired new meanings through new uses within those contexts. Moreover, I am trying to illustrate that nationalist symbolism in these instances is not simply a matter of representing a group identity, but rather articulates with the concrete concerns and agenda of movement activists, namely alterations in the structures of governance, for which civic symbolism is highly salient. The three examples discussed above highlight institutional contexts--the Old Royal High School, the General Assembly, the Vigil--in which people came together to discuss and debate common concerns, in a Scottish way, in an urban setting. The city has long been a central metaphor for this conception of the ideal political community, as the ‘Athens of the North’ continues to demonstrate.

## CONCLUSION

Various strains of thought and practice feed into the symbolising of civic nationalism in Scotland. As I have tried to suggest, the ways symbols become attached to meanings is historically contingent in some respects, but powerfully determined in others. It is also the case that symbols do not work by logical argument, but by facilitating dense clusters of associations and meanings that steer our thoughts rather than persuading our critical faculties. With this in mind, three themes seem to arise out of the vignettes sketched above. Firstly, ideas of democracy and republicanism are evoked by the backdrop of Athenian architecture and its associations, and by the association of various decision-making fora--the putative parliamentary chamber in the Old Royal High School and the proposals for a



shadow senate, the General Assembly of the Kirk, the small group gathered around the Vigil's 'flame'. Secondly, the Edinburgh cityscape in the round, with its monumental attire, connotes the concrete historical tradition of civil self-government in Scotland reaching back into the nineteenth century. Then the power to govern through cities and towns was widely felt to be sufficient, today a national parliament is commonly considered necessary as well, but changing aims does not undo the connections of civic tradition.

Finally, and somewhat in tension with these first two themes, there is the perennial theme of nationalism: modernisation. Edinburgh is a receptacle of civic tradition, but it is also conveniently symbolically detached from the weight of the immediate industrial past and ensuing industrial decline. It evades the 'Glasgow problem'. There is a convenient hiatus between its eighteenth and nineteenth century splendour and the present, which in almost all nationalisms is oriented toward the future, toward progress. This is a tension summed up in the choice of Enric Miralles' design for the new parliament building. This core dilemma of nationalism has often been represented as its Janus-faced nature (Nairn 1977), its need to lay claim to a deep and stable past in order to make viable claims to determine the nation's future. One thing this essay has tried to suggest is that it is not just nationalism, but urbanism as well that is Janus-faced--constantly negotiating the present and the future through visions of the past. The industrial city is imagined through the small town, the service oriented conurbation is filtered through life in the industrial tenement.

Let me conclude by pushing this point a little bit further, because nationalism and urbanism are not just 'like' each other, they are deeply interrelated. The pressures of industrialisation and modernisation make nations and cities as parts of a more or less unified historical process. I have tried to situate the civic symbolism of Edinburgh within the concrete historical transformation of urban Scotland. Earlier I tentatively suggested that since the 1970s Scotland has been entering into a new phase of urbanism. As noted above, while the proportion of Scotland's population in the cities has been declining, the overall degree of urbanisation has been increasing. Scots are increasingly distributed more evenly across a

smaller to larger spectrum of urbanised life, particularly in the conurbation of the central belt. Of Scotland's population of around five million, over 3 million live in the central belt area, broadly defined, with just over 600 thousand of those in Glasgow City, and about 450 thousand in the City of Edinburgh (Government Statistical Service 1998: 8-9). Increased communications no doubt contribute to a greater integration of this urban space, as more people use trains and own cars, and telephones, mobile phones and e-mail further collapse distances. I personally know many professionals who regularly commute within this central belt sphere, causing me to wonder if McPherson's 'Kirriemuir career' isn't being displaced by the 'M8 career' (appropriately enough, named after something that is neither here nor there). The fierce competition for market share between the Glasgow's *Herald* and Edinburgh's *Scotsman* in recent years would further seem to suggest that central belt middle classes now share very similar urban horizons.

There is of course continuing regionalism and localism throughout Scotland, people often strongly attaching their identities to particular places. But what I am suggesting here is that the central belt is increasingly not just an umbrella term for a collection of places (cities and towns), but also a 'place' in its own right, a sphere of urban life. The relatively lower levels of support for devolution among outlying populations, often attributed a fear of being ruled by 'Glasgow councillors and Edinburgh lawyers' underscores this point. The other common riposte from such places as Orkney and Shetland--'what's the difference between being ruled from London, and being ruled from the central belt?'--aphorises an important insight. It is indeed urban centres that call the shots in the modern world. Many have observed that the political tensions that have led to devolution in Scotland involve not so much a clash of interests between Scotland and England, as between Scotland and the London-centred South-Eastern core of the UK economy. So why not take the reservations of the Scottish hinterlands seriously, why not go the rest of the way, and see it as tension between the urban centres of the central belt and the London behemoth? In both countries, many parts of the outlying 'nation' relate somewhat uneasily to the dominant urban core. But, because of the

nature of power, it is those at the urban core whose voices are privileged in defining themselves as the nation, bringing others along in tow.

Somewhere along the line, the Scottish Victorian cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow and their surrounding towns became the Central Belt Nation of today. The midwife in this process was probably the nexus of governing institutions of the twentieth-century welfare state delivering a unified strategy of social policies through the Scottish Office, the local authorities, the array of non-departmental public bodies, and civil society more generally. As governance has shifted hands from clusters of regional civic elites and middle classes with strong ties to local capital and property, to a more mobile class of professionals, managers and politicians negotiating interests in a quasi-corporatist political environment, a new kind of urban Scotland has been taking shape, one with a new need to imagine itself as a nation.

## Notes

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<sup>ii</sup> Here and throughout I will use the term nationalism in its broadest sense to mean the promotion of national interests and identity, whether in cultural or political terms, and the pursuit of greater political autonomy, no matter in what form.

<sup>iii</sup> This is not to say that these conceptual pairs can be simply equated with each other. For some recent attempts to critique this dichotomous tendency in nationalism theory, see Brown (1999), Nieguth (1999), Nielsen (1999) and Yack (1999).

<sup>iv</sup> In fact, it was later renamed 'Parliament House', but this name never really stuck in popular discourse, and was later contradicted by plans to locate the new parliament elsewhere.

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